

Casullo, Albert, *A Priori Justification*, Oxford University Press, 2003, 272 pp. \$55 (hc), ISBN 0195115058

Albert Casullo's magisterial discussion of a priori justification is a many-sided work. His stated goal, to provide "a systematic treatment of the primary epistemological issues associated with the a priori that is sensitive to recent developments in the field of epistemology" (3), articulates precisely what the book has to offer. It is everywhere dense, bristling with useful distinctions. It is often original, and sometimes – particularly in the criticism of other philosophers – compelling. And on a few key points of great philosophical importance where "recent developments in the field of epistemology" are most questionable, it is maddeningly silent.

Casullo flies his flag at the outset by separating the concept of a priori knowledge from that of a priori justification. The latter he defines in a minimal fashion: it is "simply the concept of nonexperiential justification" (3), and S has a priori knowledge that p just in case S's belief that p, in addition to being justified a priori, meets whatever other conditions are required for knowledge (i.e. truth and perhaps something to mollify Gettier). The traditional concomitants of a priori knowledge – certainty, necessity, infallibility – are all missing here, and it becomes an open question (one that Casullo will in each case answer negatively) whether any of them apply in general to a priori knowledge.

Armed with this generic characterization of a priori justification, Casullo proposes to address three further questions: is there any a priori justification? And what, if anything, are the relationships between a priori justification and the concepts of *necessary truth* and *analyticity*?

His answer to the first of these is that there are no compelling arguments in the literature either for or against the notion of a priori knowledge. He deftly refutes the notion that the idea is incoherent but leaves open the question of whether such knowledge exists, calling for more empirical investigation in which "experience" is treated as a natural kind and the question of the existence of a priori knowledge will depend on whether there is an interesting cluster of properties attendant on the processes associated with the five senses and whether, if there is, dividing cognitive processes into two categories depending on the presence or absence of those features is "fruitful for theorizing about human cognition." (181-2)

On the relationship between a priori knowledge and the historically associated

concepts of necessary truth and analyticity, Casullo's strategy is to minimize the connections. He argues that answering the question of the relationship between a priori knowledge (in his minimal sense) and either of these other concepts is not required – and not helpful – for tackling the “internal” questions of the nature and existence of a priori knowledge. In particular, restricting a priori knowledge to analytic truths does not actually address the internal questions; in his view, “no conception of analyticity provides a complete explanation of how a priori knowledge is possible” (237).

No one could fail to be impressed by Casullo's meticulous argumentation. I have little doubt that the book will set the standard for discussions of the a priori within externalist epistemology for decades to come. But his call for empirical investigation into human cognition in order to address the question of the relation between necessary truth and a priori knowledge is largely unargued. Simple questions about this project are left unanswered, perhaps because Casullo does not think them worth asking. Why, for example, should it take empirical investigation to determine that my belief that all brown dogs are dogs is justified a priori and that it is a necessary truth? What empirical evidence could possibly undermine either of these claims? The very fact that a book on this topic does not offer any convincing answers to these questions suggests that Casullo is wrong, at any event, when he says that “the major divide in contemporary epistemology is between those who embrace and those who reject the a priori.” (3) It is rather between those who embrace and those who reject epistemic externalism.